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1995

Exhibition Pamphlet: Treasure Hunt - Guan Wei (1995)

Wei GUAN 关伟

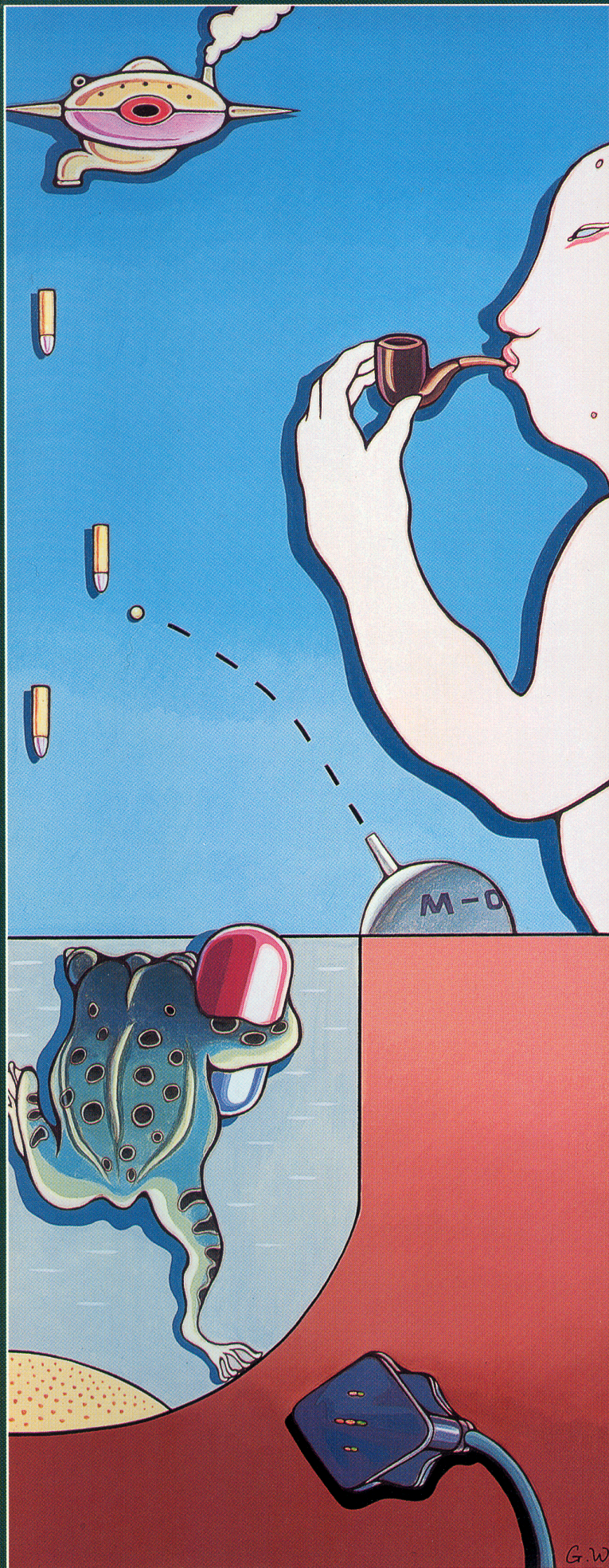
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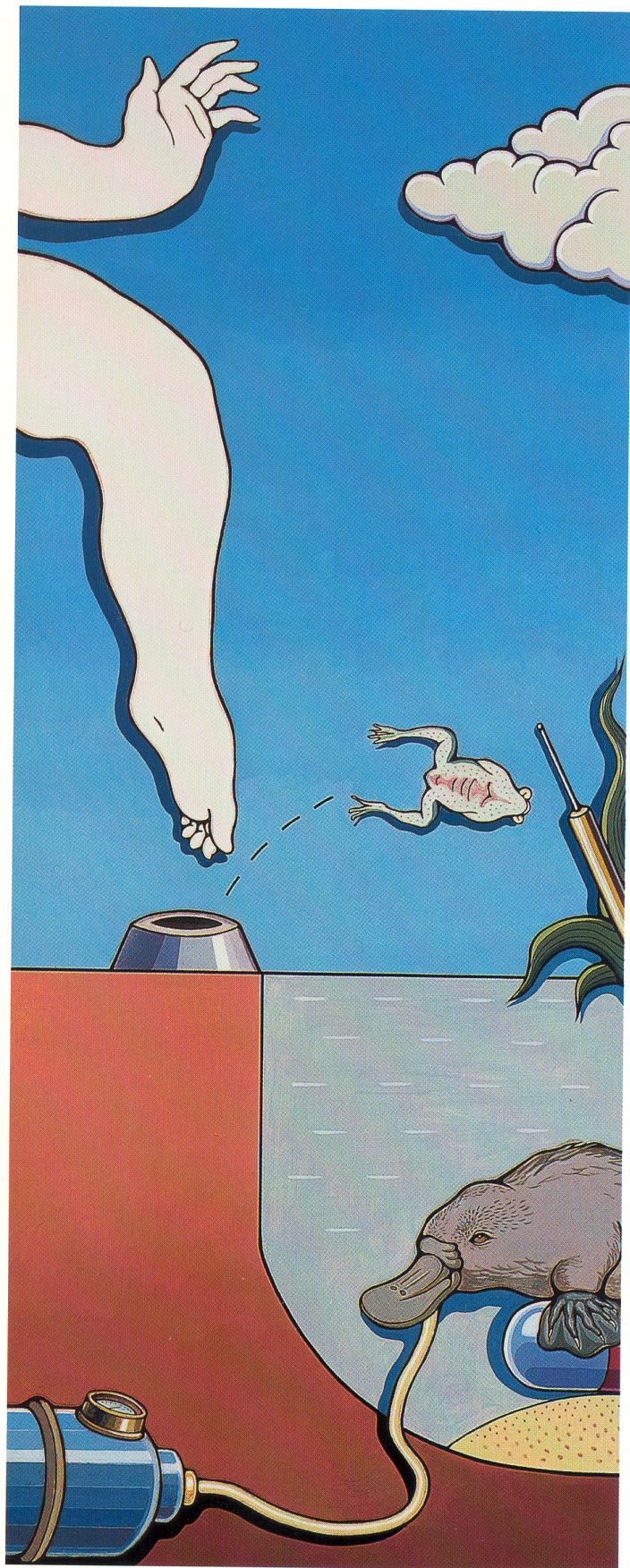
GUAN WEI



SHERMAN GALLERIES
GOODHOPE

28 September–21 October 1995

Treasure Hunt 12 1995 acrylic on canvas 127 x 49 cm



Treasure Hunt | 1995 acrylic on canvas 127 x 49 cm

FABULOUS ENGAGEMENTS

recent work by Guan Wei

Exploring the art of the west in the 1980s (mostly through books and periodicals while in Beijing, but more diversely after first visiting Tasmania in 1988–89), Guan Wei confronted a welter of forms, motifs, textures, gestures, styles. In a period of intense experimentation with languages of art within an internationalist history of avant-garde developments this century, the young Chinese artist faced compelling issues of challenge, absorption and self-definition. He sought to adopt an openness to many systems of representation without being engulfed by an infinite clamour of images.

The paintings that have ensued in recent years – marked by his coming to live and work, and finally gaining residency in Australia – constitute a body of work through which Guan Wei has evolved a quite individual language. To mix imageries borrowed from both Chinese and Maori culture: Guan Wei's recent works not only evince the growth of a personal and idiosyncratic style, but also constitute his own 'language nest'.

The nest is a conceit he has discussed fondly on a number of occasions. In building and inhabiting his nest of individually inflected subject-matter, Guan Wei seeks to nurture his own visual dialect within certain self-imposed limits. He cultivates a necessarily personal territory of imagery that provides both vantage-point and refuge from the surrounding world.

In retrospect, considering works produced both in China and Australia, it can be seen that the artist needed to find a way of dealing with the contemporary world that both exceeded what he had inherited in Chinese tradition, while on the other hand enabling him to reflect upon, engage and redefine his own cultural history. Indeed only through articulating his social and philosophical itineraries in a quite personal way could Guan Wei address the wider world of 'international art'.

The three series in the present exhibition are linked by the artist's recent ruminations on cultural differences expressed through human attitudes to physical and spiritual well-being. *Treasure Hunt* (a series of 20 works) was completed earlier this year. It presents a string of adventures as a mock-epic, with a synthetic drug-capsule providing the picaresque focus of each questing episode. Incorporating Australian creatures in a loving detail that is normally confined to children's books, and set in a generalised landscape of desert, craters and waterholes, the drama unfolds like a trans-national mini-series with a welter of briefly appearing characters and slender narrative lines. This series discloses Guan Wei in his most comedic vein of fantastic cultural narrative cloaking a wry social commentary.

The *Treasure Hunt* series was followed closely by *The Last Supper* and *The Efficacy of Medicine*. Throughout both the latter series there is a common pictorial structure and thematic unity. Every canvas is similarly divided, presenting a seated figure confronted by a colourful drink in a glass before him. Each glass holds a liquid of ambiguous contents and is attended by various symbolic accessories: toys, dice, vividly detailed plants, creatures or common artefacts of daily life.

Like small fables, each scene discloses a vignette of life in action, replete with contrary tendencies and possibilities. In a vein of contemporary pantomime, Guan Wei details how complex the quest for social coherence has become for multicultural citizens of the world, in a hyper-realm of instant choice and infinite combinations.

The beverages are polychrome and appealing. One drink cunningly sports a yin/yang swizzle-stick; others are accompanied by powders, seeds or the ubiquitous soluble capsules of instantaneous social alchemy. However a closer inspection hints at ambiguous contents and effects. Perhaps delightful, perhaps noxious; perhaps medicinal perhaps narcotic; perhaps beneficial, perhaps lethal; age-old and new-age: a panoply of contrasting rituals and remedies is animated in a

collage of cultural attitudes to the body and psychic well-being.

The middle series of works in the present exhibition perhaps establishes most sharply the varied operations in play, raising complex questions of interpretation. Guan Wei recomposes the exotic symbolic machinery of *The Last Supper* with a radical alteration of meaning. He treats the subject with the starkly reversing truth of its strangeness to his own cultural heritage. Like a curious reader of fanciful tales enacted in strange cultural landscapes, he paraphrases the synoptic scene of Christ's impending betrayal among his disciples as a series of isolated episodes. Leonardo da Vinci's work in Milan has actually been studied by the artist in an available monograph; however any close comparison with the hallowed Renaissance archetype could only dramatise difference.

Ironically aware of contrary conventions, Guan Wei voids the Christian subject of its spiritual density and iconographical complexity. In place of a resonant space suffused with presence and portent, he represents his seated characters in reduced depth as a panel of independent performers. Instead of a machinery of intricate psychological implication the relationship between Guan Wei's characters is purely formal. Each gesticulates in a shallow booth of space, his halo secularised as a yellow discus. In front of him on the table is not the sacramental meal of the Eucharist but a wondrous modern concoction. The action, too, is suffused with cultural creole. Christ's gesture is partly that of a graceful Bodhisattva; part deal-clincher: Judas calls the police.

However the visual dexterities employed also recall court-style nuance and refinement. Every figure is delineated by Guan Wei within a lively, elegant silhouette. Each is caught in an individuating pose, servicing an allegorical contrast of human gesture.

The *mise-en-scène* structuring Guan Wei's work is meanwhile quite distinct from a western world-view. The observer of these images cannot – as the Christian subject immemorally calls its audience to do – navigate a subjective complicity with a specific 'historical' moment, or establish an ongoing connection with a unique drama of religious destiny. In contrast to a telescopic, personal, universalising narrative of world history, Guan Wei's conception of humankind is utterly different. The individual's place in the world (in nature) is far more modest and contingent.

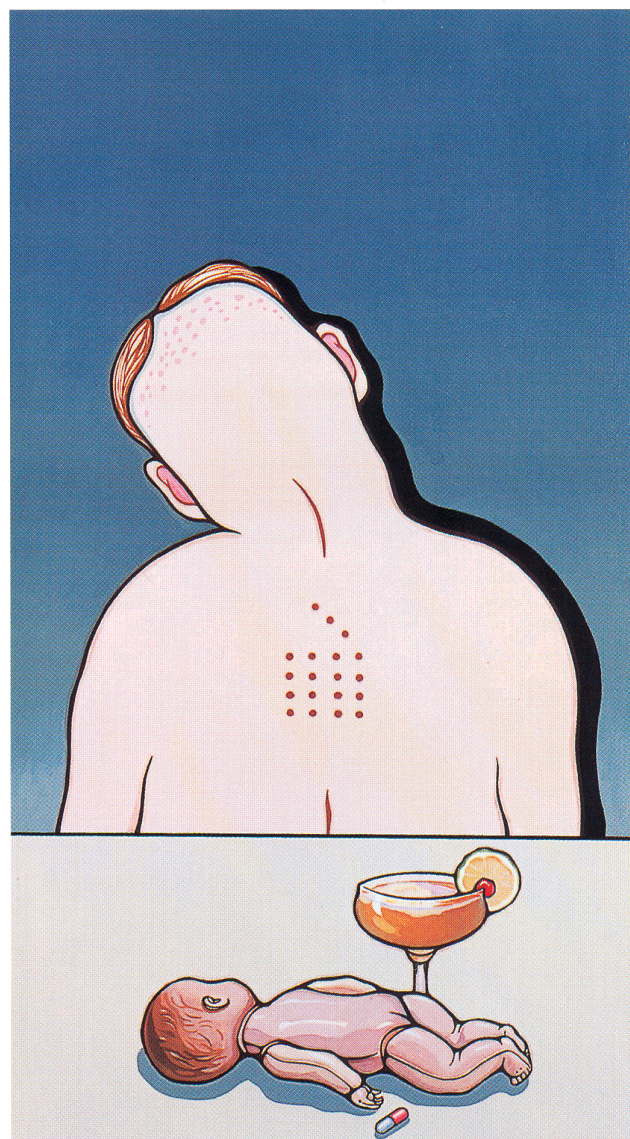
The figures in Guan Wei's universe act with a disarming immediacy. Their ego is circumscribed. They do not battle or venture great upheavals in the cause of personal triumph or psychological redemption. Instead, they inspect, muse, labour, doodle, strive, doze and wonder. The individual, according to this scheme of things, can but enact quite particular scenarios, engaging with small details and local incidents within the larger ordering of the world.

Action and reaction between things define the flow of life – not a primordial disappointment between humankind and a creator. The everyday may nevertheless be animated through considerable personal ingenuity. There is mirth to be had in many moments; pathos, perplexity and frustration in others. However it is futile to reach for an over-determining structure, or self-dramatising, personal exegesis. Only through integrity, connectedness and the exercise of judgement can human beings attain wisdom. Such is the texture of this universe.

Another, now-recurrent feature of Guan Wei's generic figures is their particular physiognomy, distinguished by a single eye. This again derives from a specific cultural background. According to Taoist philosophy, only one eye need be trained on the external world, while an inner eye may focus on the interior self, uniting two kinds of vision in one individual, securing organic balance and harmony.

Guan Wei perhaps recasts this dualism in cultural rather than specifically spiritual terms. With a mobility intensified by travel to a new country and a journey into new traditions, his external vision notates and interprets what is available to him in the wider world of multicultural transaction. Meanwhile an interior editing re-casts these influences. They are filtered and reordered in terms of his own, cumulated personal history and culturally mediated vision.

The strengths of the work Guan Wei has evolved, have to do with his manner of confronting difference, of dealing with heterodox cultural influences. He mixes motifs and materials in ways that highlight their dislocation from any single entexturing culture of origin. In this respect his work reveals new processes of synthesis rather than a cleaving to orthodox heritage.



Efficacy of Medicine 10 1995 acrylic on canvas 87 x 46 cm

Guan Wei has evolved a distinctive style, which also provides special means of securing multiple translations within his work. Perhaps a deeper and more subtle achievement is the way in which he thereby establishes an evolving, dynamic and pluriform identity – more typical of the cultural survival skills needed by his generation than the reiteration of continuity and adherence to tradition.

It might be seen that Guan Wei's art reaches back and forward at the same time. It retrieves features from the pre-industrial traditions of Chinese art (the accrued resources of aesthetics and philosophical dispositions that have constituted Chinese sensibility). This can be observed, for example, in the artist's favoured use of narrow formats that read from top to bottom in episodic registers, while the various parts are also freely assembled into a generally unified, 'western' space of common action.

Reaching back into tradition, and aware of individualising streams of improvisation that have often been devalued, even repressed by recent political ideology in China, Guan Wei finds ways to bring the old towards the new and strange, often achieving an ironically productive fusion of contrary representational modes. This is not to suggest a simple 'progressivist' reading of Guan Wei's work. More interesting, ultimately, is the way in which he handles his own cultural heritage and the drama of its ongoing confrontation with international modernity with a special suppleness, humour and invention.

Bernice Murphy

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

- 1957 Born Beijing, China
 1978 Began art career and since then has painted several series of works including *Small Yards*, *Self Portraits*, *Figures with Acupoints*, *Bean-Like Eyes*, *Red Soles*, *Pictures of Dull-Looking*, *Dhyana of Two Fingers*, *Diary*, *Paper* and representative works: *Zhi Hu Zhe Ye*, *Pay Attention to Hygiene*, *Stamp A Circle*, *Play Rope*, *The Living Specimen*, *Test Tube Baby* and *The Great War of the Eggplant*
 1986 Graduated from the Department of Fine Arts of Beijing Teachers' Institute and became an art teacher in a Middle School
 1989-92 Artist-in-Residence, Centre for the Arts, University of Tasmania, Hobart
 1992-93 Artist-in-Residence, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
 1993-94 Artist-in-Residence, Canberra School of Art, National University of Australia, Canberra

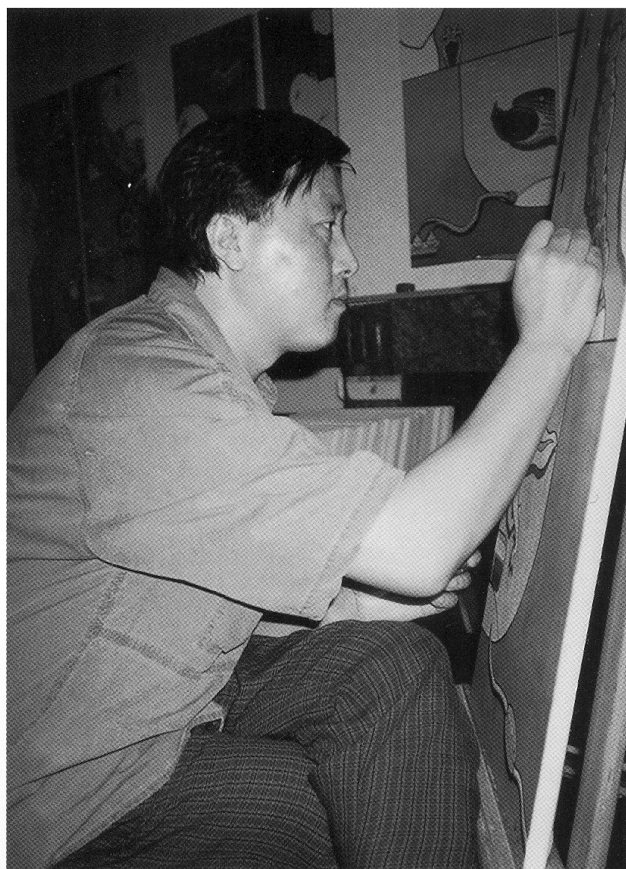
SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1989 French Embassy, Beijing
 1991 School of Fine Art in The Australian National University, Canberra; Centre for the Arts, University of Tasmania, Hobart; Despard Street Gallery, Hobart; Waverley City Gallery, Melbourne.
 1992 Dick Bett Gallery, Hobart; Centre for the Arts, University of Tasmania, Hobart
 1993 Sherman Galleries, Sydney
 1994 Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra School of Art, Canberra
 1995 Sherman Galleries, Sydney

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1986 *Exhibition of Four Artists*, Beijing University, Beijing; Autumn Salon Exhibition, Paris
 1987 *Guan Wei and Ah Xian Paintings*, Beijing University, Beijing
 1988 *Alumni Painting Exhibition*, Beijing Teachers' Institute, Beijing
 1989 *Individual Paintings*, Beijing Teachers' Institute, Beijing
 1990 *Contemporary Chinese Young Artists' works*, Twin Cranes Gallery, Seattle, USA; International Youth Art Show, Paris; Lun Exhibition, (six artists works), Beijing
 1990-91 Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania, Hobart
 1991 *Twelve Contemporary Chinese Artists*, University of Sydney, Sydney; Exhibition Gallery, Mt Waverley, Victoria; *Echoes of China - From Behind the Bamboo Curtain - Three Contemporary Chinese Artists*, Irving Galleries (renamed Sherman Galleries in October 1992), Sydney
 1992 *Orient-ations - 'The Emperor's New Clothes'*, Irving Galleries, Sydney; *New Chinese Art*, University of NSW, Sydney
 1992-93 *Chinese New Wave*, Chameleon Contemporary Art Space, Hobart; *Third Australian Contemporary Art Fair*, Melbourne
 1993 *New Art from China, post-1989*, Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong; *Mao Goes Pop, China post-1989*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; *Silent Energy*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, UK; *Second Asian Art Fair*, Hong Kong
 1995 *Perspecta*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney; *Group Show*, Sherman Galleries, Sydney; *Collectable Egg-beater*, Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania, Hobart

BIBLIOGRAPHY



Guan Wei working in his studio

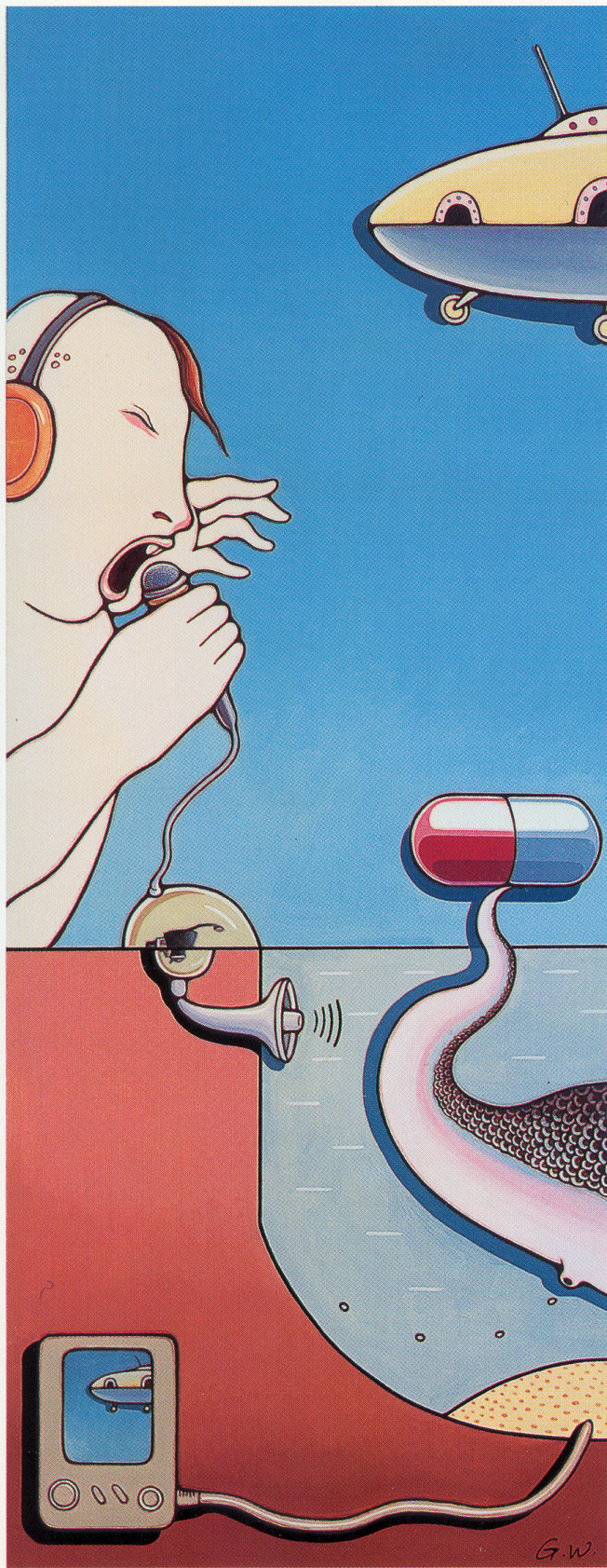
- 1989 Interviewed by ABC TV, Australia; *Arties*, March, Spanish, p. 56
 1990 Interviewed by Spanish National TV; *Contemporary*, September, USA, p. 83
 1991 Interviewed by ABC Radio, Australia; *Art Monthly*, May, Australia, pp. 14-15
 1992 Interviewed by SBS TV, Australia; *Flash Art*, January/February, Italy, p. 111; *Agenda*, March/April, Australia, p. 17; *Art Monthly*, April, Australia, p. 23; *Orientations*, July, Hong Kong, cover & p. 53; *Art Monthly*, September, Australia, p. 9; *Art & Australia*, Summer Edition, Australia, p. 242
 1993 *Artist*, May 1993, Taiwan, p. 153; interviewed by SBS TV, Australia

COLLECTIONS

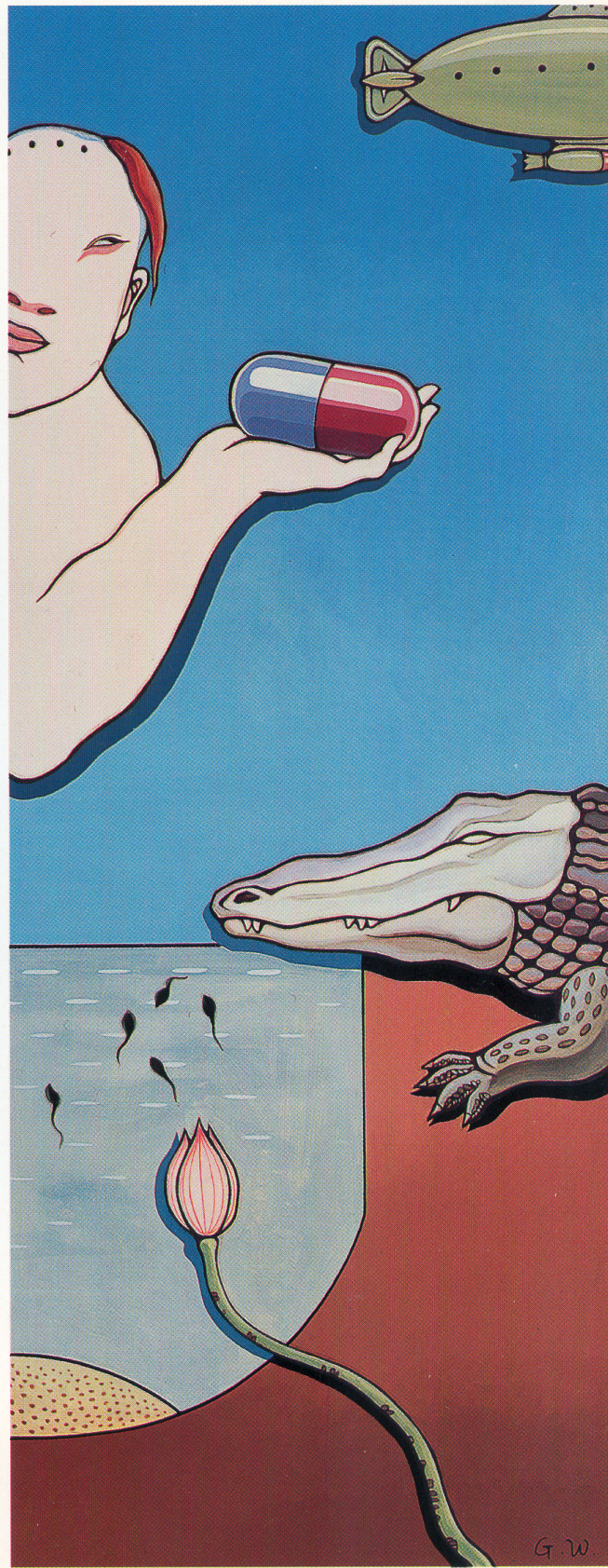
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Treasure Hunt 2 1995 acrylic on canvas 127 x 49 cm



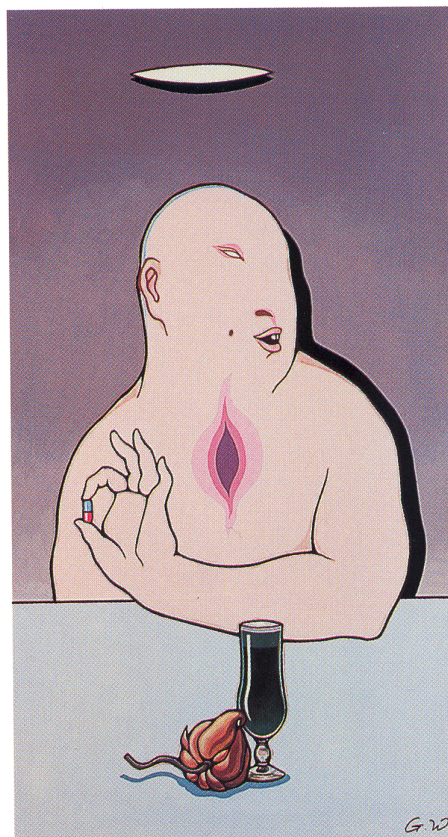
Treasure Hunt 11 1995 acrylic on canvas 127 x 49 cm



The Last Supper 9 1995
acrylic on canvas 87 x 46 cm



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acrylic on canvas 87 x 46 cm



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acrylic on canvas 87 x 46 cm

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